

(1) Dear Mario Petrucci, first of all, thank you for your acceptance of our invitation. As a starting point, we would like to know you by hearing from you. Who is Mario Petrucci, how would you describe yourself?

Ah, there's danger in this question! This feels like going on a first romantic date, and wanting so much to please your companion that you suddenly overhear yourself telling her how important you are. It never goes down well, or so I'm told! But, if you press me, I suppose I'm a literary frontiersman who cannot help but gravitate towards the less trodden paths of learning and life; best of all is when life gives me the gift of being able to actually create my own, singular path. I love teaching, and learning, and I do everything I can to nurture the young, encouraging them to explore rich creative realities rather than bald sensational addictions (mobile phones and materialism especially). I cringe at privilege and inequality; I believe in freedom, including of course freedom of expression; I believe in literary and political tolerance, but also in doing everything possible to generously contribute, to happily meet our obligations and responsibilities in all we do. I'm eclectic, a borrower and burrower; and I'm invigorated by connection (for instance, the linking of science and poetry, both academically and in art). But it is the yearning for human – and divine – connection that is most fundamental in me: I've translated Hafez, into English, with my entire being; and I've grown to love Rumi, Saadi, and many other mystic poets from various times and from cultures other than my own – after all, at heart, aren't we all one culture? So: I'm passionate about the mysteries of human consciousness: I mean, here, being fully awake in your soul, not just in your intellect; that is, not being a tourist in your own mind. I also feel deeply the plight of the natural world and am profoundly concerned about our various negations and inabilities in environmental care. The world will survive what we are doing to it; we may not. This is so difficult for us to change because we are so mesmerised by digital forms and the modern, westernised human exists so divorced from the soil. More personally, I'm a man of many opposites: hard-working yet (at heart) quite lazy; mostly reliable, yet also an opportunistic taker of risks; a perfectionist who makes mistakes; an idealist who is pragmatic; a creative creature who can be highly analytical; a resigned realist as well as a motivated optimist; a serious lover of fun. I hold to the Latin saying (from Virgil's *Eclogues*): “omnia vincit amor: et nos cedamus amori”... “love conquers all; let us, too, surrender to love”. What is the point of life, of artistic and literary endeavour, if some ember of generosity and love doesn't glow inextinguishably in its bosom? There, you see; I've said far too much. I may have already ruined our dinner together! I should have just said: read my works, that's all you need to know. Biography can confuse as much as it enlightens!

(2) We know that you are a poet who can combine his ecological concerns with his art. And you're also a physicist. How do you create a good combination by using art and science?

Since my first main poetry collection, *Shrapnel and Sheets*, I've been trying to gauge, and to span, the supposed arts-science divide. There's much more interest, now, in this interface than there was back then. I've been drawn by the problems and possibilities of technology, and much involved in capturing individual corpuscles of scientific perception whilst sending into my audiences a heartbeat of sensory richness and metaphysical heat. I believe that science and poetry can successfully co-exist in this way, but not so much by injecting science into poetry in an arbitrary manner, or as a kind of technological name-dropping. For me, the science has to be fully digested by the creative process, so that the poems achieve a negotiated co-habitation, an organic balance. That was certainly my intention with the book-length sequence *Heavy Water: a poem for Chernobyl*, and my 2007 collection, *Flowers of Sulphur*. So, yes, although my laboratory days are very much behind me, I still do keep an on-going eye on science. I think it's important that I experienced science not just as an idea in books, but as a practical experience at the coal face, as a physicist and engineer who performed real experiments and wrote scientific papers; because of this, I feel I may use science in my poetry in a different way from others. That said, the 'ideas' are crucial too: both science and art ask deeper questions of what is superficially observed, and both activities, in their way, adopt a hypothetical and provisional stance towards what they try to understand. This links back to my life-long fascination with truth and consciousness, because science and art, at their best, each demand that we pay full, plural attention to the world, and to ourselves. Our assumptions and perceptions about the world, about ourselves, largely build what we are; questioning all of that – through philosophy, art and spirituality as well as via science – is the engine-room of my writing. Quantum physics tells us, in a manner of speaking, that everything can become everything else; poetry, at its height, *lives* that insight. As that prolific

writer, Anonymous, has said: a physicist is the atom's way of thinking about atoms. Perhaps, then, a poet is the poem's way of thinking about language.

(3) You're a unique artist. Your award-winning sequence 'Heavy Water' filled an entire book, and was turned into a film. We know that novels can inspire movies; but it's highly unusual to transform a poem into a movie. What are your opinions on this? And did you use special techniques in your poem so that it could inspire a movie?

Yes, it's true: it's rare for a film script to be primarily poetry-driven. None of us making the film, including the directors, had any consolidated initial idea of how to approach such work. It seemed to me that films involving poetry either overwhelmed the text with visual imagery (thus it became difficult to follow the words whilst watching what was happening on the screen) or else they deployed their visual effects in an illustrative way, simply mirroring the textual content. It eventually became clear to us that our methodology was unlikely to be a well-established one, and that at least some of the filmic outcomes couldn't be imposed by us but would have to be forged in the actual shooting and making of the piece. Our shared opinion was that the heightened language of poetry was an agent of deep human transformation. It could provide, we believed, a penetrating experience of Chernobyl in its own right – not just a secondary or substitute experience, nor even merely a parallel one. As far as influences are concerned, Tarkovsky stood out for us, in terms of his style and generation of mood. I've no doubt whatsoever that those early discussions and brainstorming sessions were crucial in deciding which poetic monologues should be used and what was to be captured (and how) on camera. We also headhunted actors very carefully for their known aptitude to work sensitively with poetry (for instance, Juliet Stevenson's controlled yet human immersion in character, as well as David Threlfall's impressive renditions of Wordsworth for the BBC). The decision was taken not to show any of these speakers on screen; I, for one, felt this would help to emphasise the text as poetry rather than as reconstructed documentary. To answer the final part of your question, though: no, I didn't write the book with a film in mind; but a great deal of the text of *Heavy Water* does consist of various utterances that fall quite naturally into monologues for different, identifiable archetypes or 'characters'. In some ways, then, given the form for the film that we chose, the structure of the poetry (rendered mostly in the poetry book as 'speaking voices') did make scripting the film reasonably straightforward.

(4) You're a versatile artist. You're also an Italian living in the UK. Multicultural artists can feed their own artistic goals very effectively, that's a fact. What are the reflections of this multicultural life upon your art?

Being Italian has provided me with a rich source of stories, perspectives, emotions, texts, songs and other cultural materials, much of which the host UK culture seems to receive as 'exotic' or at least intriguing or revealing. Growing up in London, I did however also experience that sense of being an outsider. From my earliest years, I saw the world as somehow 'not mine', however much I tried to integrate. This is rocket fuel for art. You become the 'foreigner' for whom everything is foreign, even in that family bubble where there's a strong scent of identity and security: I mean, having one foot in the 'real world' meant you couldn't quite belong at home either. So, I was always observing, reinventing, reflecting, comparing: a blessing as well as a curse! On the larger multicultural scale, our new century still seems as deafened by ideology as the last, and we continue to struggle against cultural and literary separatism that sometimes borders on a kind of 'aesthetic apartheid'. With globalisation, mobility and the internet, though, nations and their citizens are increasingly brought face to face across cultural divides: this carries huge implications, not just for dangerous viruses, but also for politics, for human rights, and for art. The need for fresh forms of conversation, including artistic dialogue on its many levels, has never been more essential or more possible. I'm very much aware, now, that I'm a writer and artist speaking, potentially, to a planet, to a species, as well as to the particular individual before me at a reading. Poetry can be a potent vehicle for that multi-conversation. Many voices continue to lie dormant or ignored in our hyper-speaking world; but we have at least begun to witness, in more recent times, some openings up, more breakings of silence.

(5) Some people call you "the poet of war". However, it would be better to use the description "the poet who chases peace by using war in his art". What's your main motivation to write on war?

I'm so fortunate to have been poet in residence at the Imperial War Museum. I was already alert to war when I joined the Museum, but my long residency there finally woke me, bolt upright. Motivation? My family in Italy broken and scattered, and still – even now – trying to heal. Sidney Keyes, the brilliant young poet tragically killed in 1943, talks about the century's "Death Wish". 27 million Russians. 6 million Jews. And all the others. That is my motivation.

(6) You have won so many prizes, as mentioned when we introduced you. As an award-winning poet, what are your opinions about awards? Are they a natural part of working for poets, or a danger which relaxes them so that they cannot create more effective art?

That's a tough question, particularly as I don't wish to bite the hand that has sometimes fed me! Where to begin? Would you be shocked if I said that, for me, poetry is a kind of failure? Like mathematics, language can never fully express the world – the outer world of material objects or those inner worlds of emotion and thought. Alfred Korzybski warned: whatever we say a thing is, it is not that; it is both different and more. Poetry reaches for that difference. Poetry fails to match reality in certain respects, but – in the process – generates something more. Poetry constantly falls short – but miraculously so. The entire point of the poetic elements is to create a universe bursting with combinations as simple and lucid as sodium chloride and as complex and potent as DNA. What do awards say about all of that? I suppose one of the strengths of awards is to offer a few (well-chosen?) artists the food of encouragement and the oxygen of publicity; but do awards bring us genuinely and radically important works rather than those that are favourably engaging, commercially viable, skilfully marketed, or merely competent? Do the judges look beyond their own reflection, through their own favouritism and agendas? Do awards direct TOO much attention to the same few places? Does a work become important *because* of an award instead of getting an award because it's important? What's the value of awards in the wake of 9/11, economic problems, and impending ecological catastrophe? Is art about creating winners and losers? Is art about celebrity, political in-fighting, or the race for sales? The whole area of awards is just too involved and complex for me to give easy answers to any of this; but what we CAN do is let all those questions fall away and see what's left. And what is left? For me, it's the expansion and the enrichment of consciousness, a tap-root into the soul. It really is that simple, and that difficult. I have to confess that I doubt whether awards, as a whole, can capture that truth as I understand it. And yes; maybe winning (or hoping to win) awards can tempt the artist into chasing the kind of work they believe will win awards instead of going where their deeper truth leads them. Meanwhile, we're fast getting to the point where our planet may need miracles: not least, the miracle of truthful language, however difficult, uncomfortable or arcane that truth may be. I welcome any award encouraging and demonstrating such truths.

(7) I've recently read a sentence from your essay for the British Council: "At its worst, the poem is the clangour of consensus and cliché; at its best, it rings of universality and human community." You underline a nuance. Can we say that the best type of poem is to reach universal values avoiding general clichés?

Usually, yes. But Theodore Roethke warns that you can't make a poem merely by avoiding cliché. Nor, in my opinion, can you create great poetry through mere virtuosity. In Britain and America, contemporary poetry seems somewhat caught up in the habit of guiding the reader through all of the poet's insights and 'moments', step by step, labelling each part of the experience carefully in its line-sized jars. I hope I'm not being unfair in that assessment. But I generally prefer poetry that lies outside the usual range of nationality, taste, comfort and institutional admiration, not least poetry in translation. Sometimes, of course, a genuinely powerful 'outsider' also becomes part of the 'institution', as Rumi and, perhaps, Hafez have done in the West; but one should always investigate the authenticity of the translation, becoming as aware as one can of how much has been compromised. For sure, translation is a lifeblood of global literature; it's a welcome sign of curious and interconnected civilisation. Speaking more generally about cliché, though, some readers just want a newer version of what they already know; that knowledge can itself be 'universal' in that it's widely understood, but it may also be jaded and flaccid. Your readers in Turkey must decide for themselves what 'poetries', taken as a whole as well as in parts, might or mightn't achieve in them, and whether or not they wish to open themselves

to the great challenges, and even greater rewards, of artistic honesty, authenticity and growth. Being truly 'universal' touches on something unaltering yet forever fresh. It takes some courage and determination to embrace a saving consciousness.

(8) For many years, there has been a debate in Turkey. Some poets claim that the most important thing in writing poems is to avoid imaginative expression, and also that the meaning can be ignored. Other poets claim that imaginative expressions are the main vein of the poem and that the meaning and subject integrity cannot be neglected. As an experienced 'universal' poet, what would you like to say about this debate?

They are both right in claiming their own ground. They are both misguided in denying the alternative its due territory. I admire Roy Fisher and H.D. as well as Rabindranath Tagore and Emily Dickinson. There is no one way to 'correctly' compose. Every poet, every poem, establishes a way of doing things, and is to be received in those terms. Meet the poem where it is, not where you wish it to be. That doesn't mean you can't hold an informed opinion, or that you cannot be discriminating or have personal preferences; you needn't like what a poem does, or how it does it; but I prefer to see every artwork as an opportunity, an invitation to expand myself. Of course, 'bad' or offensive art exists, not least in how we perceive it; but no rigid theory ever limited a great poet, and the great poem always rises above any unbending preconception of what poetry 'should be'. For me, this is not just a literary insight; it is also guidance for living life. The dialogue between opposites, if conducted courteously and in mutual respect, can be rewarding and revealing; but those opposites are often merely preferences and can eventually be transcended. Poetry is not mathematics. Life is not mathematics. In short, to claim A or B as 'right' usually misses C, where C is a perspective that honours both A and B.

(9) Thank you for your sincere expressions and answers dear Mario Petrucci. Finally, what would you like to say to your Turkish readers?

Be courageous. Take positive risks in your creativity. Explore and stay curious. Play, and be serious. Practise generosity with all, including your fellow artists. Value honesty. Be compassionate.

I visited Turkey some time ago with the British Council, accompanying Professor Rob Pope, principally to talk about creative writing, Rewriting, and my new theories on 'Visualizations' and 'Poeclectics'. You can find out more about those ideas on my website, www.mariopetrucci.com. Visualizations are a way to explore literary studies via attractive analogies taken from science and mathematics. Poeclectics is a term I proposed, to describe a trend in contemporary British poetry to utilise all kinds of style, subject, voice, register and form. My mini-tour of Turkey was a delight, a jewel in my crown of wonderful memories. I found the young men and women I met to be respectful, attentive, and intellectually passionate. I've never encountered better manners and hospitality anywhere in the world. Turkey has a great culture; but, like all cultures, including my own, we have blind spots and places we'd rather not look. Please, allow your artists and poets to look in those places without fear. I'm not here to judge, or to blunder into issues I don't fully comprehend; as a guest in your magazine, in your culture, I need to be humble and respectful; but, whether I were speaking to a magazine in China, Russia, Australia, America, or in Africa, I would always be compelled to speak towards what we must ALL embrace if our species is to survive. So, yes, let us be proud of who we differently are; but let us also have the courage to hear any difficult observations. So, I cannot leave you without sharing with you that I also saw in Turkey the unfinished, multicoloured tower-blocks scattered across barren desert; I listened to anxious young women who hoped to escape abroad; and I heard the pained and powerful songs of marginalised communities. That was two decades ago. I hope that we all can listen, fairly, generously, to those voices in our societies that it may be convenient to ignore. Life is as tricky as it is easy; literature tells us that. We, all of us, at times, ignore; but we are none of us exempt from listening. I cannot fully embrace any art form that isn't tuned to those voices its culture quells: this applies everywhere. In this, I challenge my own culture too; and I challenge myself. Turkey has so much beauty and wisdom to build upon. So I must listen to you also; you must tell me whether these words I am about to quote, attributed to Atatürk, are what he really said, whether there is context here that I've missed or misunderstood, and if the translation is valid; all I can say is that, in raw form, however 'correct' or 'incorrect', these words speak straight to my heart: "Where there is no freedom, there is

death and destruction” and “Everything we see in the world is the creative work of women”. Art and freedom’s actuality are twin sisters; it is so much better for us not to hide in, or behind, our culture or our art; rather, art and culture should provide us with the courage and generosity to truly hear others, for that’s when we discover that their deepest voice is also our own. Art can be a distraction, allowing us to consolidate prejudice, or it can help us to break taboos, to listen, responsibly but responsively. So, choose your art carefully, as a matter of life or death. The music must not be empty; the words must carry that exquisite terror of embracing a loving transformation. Great art, great culture, has compassion and transformation in its genes. We are all of us unspeaking oppressors; we can also be, each one of us, outspoken liberators. And, yes: in liberating others, we free ourselves.

Mario Petrucci

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[interviewed by Deniz Dağdelen Düzgün]